

The boundary of love: art, paranoia and deadlock¹

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Abstract

The Norwegian-Australian artist Bjarne Melgaard has become known for his lavish, hedonistic displays that defy all norms associated with sexuality, substance abuse and art. Claiming that his art does not need to be compelling, since

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a Melgaard painting is "not about what we observe, but a painting that observes us," Melgaard radically reformulates the surrealist posture in a way that obliterates the artist as subject. When Melgaard admits to terrible pangs of paranoia we should not be surprised that his projected new home carries the title "A house to die in," echoing both the artist's creative vision and his self-perception as a mortal subject. Originally situated on the ground where the progenitor of Norwegian plastic arts, Edvard Munch, lived and drew his famous oak trees, it generated lively debate about the respective artists' place in Norwegian cultural history and the way they relate to their natural and social contexts. This paper sets out to understand Melgaard's art in light of three relations between art and its creative subject. While to Jacques Lacan we relocate ourselves as whole subjects when we reaffirm the father as law-giving instance, Martin Heidegger's suggestion was that the subject can truly only encounter itself in so far as it is ecstatically outside itself. Ultimately, Melgaard's destiny turns out to be analogous to that of a dominant trend in contemporary art as such. As Slavoj Žižek points out, his kind of opportunistic, permanent transgressivity can only lead to dullness and deadlock. Can the end of Melgaard's personal housing project usher into a new era beyond this deadlock?

Keywords: phenomenology; Melgaard; art; subject; perversion;
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In Jacques Lacan's work on the mirror stage, the subject famously moves through three phases of subjectivisation. From a first state of disjunctive and fragmentary body-image, the subject acquires a defensive structure – the ego – that enables it to make sense of the fleeting images and impressions that it encounters. This bulwark, often referred to as a fortress or a stadium, serves to distinguish the child from the mother, and to usher it into the symbolic domain. What is often ignored or simply disregarded in descriptions of the formation of the subject is what Lacan refers to as a third phase. Here, we are

confronted with – as it were – a forking path. Either, we submit to the healing and unifying force of the paternal

¹ Previous versions of this essay has previously been presented as papers at the seminar "The Metaphysics of the Person," hosted by the *British Personalist Forum*, at Derby Hall, University of Nottingham, 18 March, 2017; and at the MeCCA Conference at London South Bank University, 11 January, 2018, and has benefitted from generous comments from conference participants. The author would also like to thank *Inscription's* reviewers for their thoughtful and considerate commentary.

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signifier – the phallus – and recognise its loving relation to the subject, or we succumb to states of horrifying and excruciating paranoia – a loveless world without hope and without trust.

This article examines the subject in the thought of Lacan and his predecessor Martin Heidegger. Against a background of how one specific artist – Bjarne Melgaard – gives expression to his own journey into art and subjectivity, we will further explore how an approach drawn from Lacan and Heidegger can transform Melgaard's encounters with paranoia into a dwelling for thought and a *topos* for creativity. Finally, in view of the state of Melgaard's most publicised project – "A house to die in" – the essay seeks to arrive at an understanding of how this artist's output in some sense can be approached as indexing the state of the contemporary artworld at large: has contemporary art reached an impasse in its endless search for transgressions and provocations?

What is clear is that in Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, the subject transforms from an entity that takes cover in a fortress to a distributed self, what Lacan referred to as the *social I*. It was here that Lacan drew most significantly on the work of Martin Heidegger, whose notion of an *ek-static* subject – a subject that is, in a sense, *outside* itself – is perfectly congruent with Lacan's mirror stage and the idea of self we find in its third phase. As we shall see, it is in the eccentricity of the subject that Lacan holds out a promise of rescue from the horrors of paranoia.

The artistic self – a contemporary figure we have come to increasingly associate with transgression and provocation – seems particularly suited to demonstrate the relation between paranoia and eccentricity. However, if artists are especially sensitive to these trappings of the subject, how can they safeguard their sanity? The philosopher Wolfgang Schirmacher has proposed one solution to this question: through forgetting and *veiling* of such experiences the *ex-centric* subject can return to itself and its everyday encounters, so as to retain the artistic sense of the transversal in a dwelling that is habitable to someone acting and creating in the pain of life and in the nearness of life's finality (Schirmacher 2000, 41).



Bjarne Melgaard, an artist of Australian and Norwegian extraction, gives flesh to these senses of ego-formation. In his first major solo exhibition in New York in 2000, Melgaard made it to the New York Times's review section, where his work was described as a "daredevil nose dive into abjection" (Cotter 2000). The reviewer warned that Melgaard was one of Europe's current "bad boys." In the exhibition, images from the movie *Planet of the Apes* was transformed and mutilated in such a way that the title seemed befitting: "The Mutilation of the Apes." Here, life-sized sculptures of apes in space suits engaged in boundary breaking homosexual acts, seemingly an "allegory for the dire consequences of certain kinds of political control." However, the reviewer implied that Melgaard's motives could be less than noble, since he left "the details ambiguous, choosing instead to pump up a general sense of apocalyptic menace and, through references to race wars, child pornography and dubious cultural heroes, to push, almost randomly, a whole keyboard of hot buttons."

His shock tactics worked. Melgaard became one of international art dealer Saatchi's household names, and the exhibition he organised in New York in 2013 around the publication of his novel was again reviewed by the New York Times. This time, the reviewer made a note of installations that gave the impression of an "exercise in overkill that, upstairs, [turned] into something else, a study in fetishistic hoarding. There [were] dolls [...] chained up or tied down. Furniture-jammed rooms [were] strewn with crack pipes, Pink Panther drawings, Coke cans, pill vials, and syringes. On one floor there [was] a display of Mr. Melgaard's new paintings, semiabstract, in intestinal colours; on another, a bondage snuff film" (Cotter 2013). Tellingly, the reviewer regarded the exhibition as a form of "child's play, with the concentration and imaginative leaps that implies."

Lacan noted how the child relates differently to the imaginary at different stages of the ego formation. What is crucial in Lacan's formulation of the subject is that the ego associated with the imaginary state initially serves to distinguish the child from the mother. This is where the term mirror stage has its origin: Lacan would observe infants moving about in front of a mirror, noting how they at one point would figure out that they could control the image of their body and render its movements in the mirror as distinct from the objects in the background.

The celebration of this moment of self mastery is what ushers the child into an ego formation that, in time, increasingly takes the shape of a fortress. It is, after all, only a short step from the joy of being able to distinguish oneself from a world in which we act to the moment when we can image some commanding figure pointing to our

image and submitting that what we behold is, indeed, ourselves: “that is you, there, in the mirror.” In other words, what he have is a trajectory that begins with a fragmentary body image, via a literal self-image of the child as whole, to a defensive posture that child takes inside a fortress or stadium. We will approach Melgaard’s art as situated along this trajectory, culminating in a position where the artistic subject seeks to shield itself from what it perceives as a threatening injunction of a paternal order – the voice precisely exemplified by the New York Times’ critic, relegating Melgaard’s art to the domain of children, implicitly admonishing the artist for not having sufficiently shouldered the rôle of the father, or, in the language of Lacan, to not fully have affirmed the symbolic domain.³

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Crucially when the child passes from the imaginary to the symbolic order it acquires a new relation to the phallus. This is a signifier that stands in for the symbolic order as a whole, and it is only by submitting to the order *per se* that we can become participants and gain recognition from those who navigate the order of symbols. The analogy here is between, on the one hand, the child and fantasy, and, on the other, the child and the order of the law.⁴ While the ego serves as a phantasmatic shield against the fragmented body image and the inchoate impressions that force themselves on the child from the beginning, it meets its limit when we enter the symbolic domain. Here, we subordinate our wishes to the law, and our individual ego finds ways to coexist with others in a realm where as many claims are made on us as we make on others.

In short, the symbolic order is guarded by the phallus, which we will understand here as an image of the father. When we violate the law, we also set ourselves outside the domain of the father. In so far as the father’s law is a law that is instituted with the love a regent admonishes on his subjects, being outside the law is coextensive with being outside the father’s love. It is in this light we should understand Lacan’s forking path at the inauguration of the mirror stage’s third phase: either we submit to the law of the father and recognise that our individual ego is merely one among many, or we experience a fortress that grows so thick and impenetrable that we become isolated and set apart from others, ushering us into a feeling of being persecuted by a malignant force who seeks to entrap us. The name of such emotions – associated as they are with a sense of isolation – is paranoia.

What is the consequence of inhabiting such an overtly hedonistic universe as Melgaard’s, inhabited by boundary breaking sexual acts, race wars, child pornography, chained up and tied down dolls, crack pipes, syringes, and so on? In an interview Melgaard has explained that he often experienced a sense of overwhelming fear, even when he was alone in his own apartment:

I feel sometimes when I’m in my flat alone at night that I take physical risks. I feel that people can lock themselves in and just kill me. When I’m in my bed and I lock the door, and I kind of hear people around me. (Mlynarski 2014)

There is also no respite for the artist when he is at work in the studio. Melgaard explains that “in my studio I hear certain sounds, whatever, I feel that people are behind the painting, I feel that people are in the studio, I mean, like, things are, like, put in weird things.”

It appears that Melgaard’s experiences connected to his particular kind of artistic practice supports Lacan’s threefold formulation of the mirror stage. This *semblance* of adherence to a Lacanian approach to subjectivity is underlined when Melgaard goes on to reflect on his experiences: “The paranoia is so specific, a camera in the bank, in the bathroom. everywhere there is someone filing, recording, whatever.” Before we conclude that Melgaard has read so much psychoanalytic theory that he is able to put up a show of his debilitations, let us investigate a bit more

³ For Freud’s position on the relation between what he referred to as inverted sexuality and the dominant order, see e.g. Sigmund Freud, 2005. Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex (New York and Washington: 2005). <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14969.txt.utf-8>.

⁴ This is not to imply that there in Lacan is ever a subject that is not governed by the phantasmatic domain. The key is to grasp how the order in some sense *preses down* on the child fantastic world.

closely the second path in Lacan's fork; that is, what is it that happens when the subject actually *submits* to the phallic order?⁵

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To Lacan it is the actual experience of love that enables us to escape from the paranoia associated with the isolating processes of the ego. What Lacan referred to as the social *I*, is both a recognition of our individual limitation, and an ushering into a novel perception of the subject. The social *I* is the form in which the subject becomes a linguistic feature, the first person singular, so that the subject becomes *abstracted* from any particular ego. Since it is only through the intervention of the phallic function that we can join in this notion of subjectivity, it makes sense to say that our entrance into the symbolic order is guarded by the figure of the father in Lacan.

What is also clear is that Lacan would make explicit references to the work on the subject by Martin Heidegger. In the latter's "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger noted that "ek-sistence identifies the *determination of what man is in the destiny of truth*" (2008, 156, emphasis added). The hyphenated notion of *ek*-sistence is distinguishable from an *in*-sistence, and the inward character of the ego defence. A claim to the *ek*-centric subject, then, would find its ground outside the centre of the ego, which is what Lacan would refer to as the *barred* subject: a subject that is exempted and fundamentally shut out from itself. Access to this eccentricity was for Heidegger crucially related to his notion of truth: it is when we approach what he referred to as the clearing – when we are, so to speak, in the *nearness* of truth – that we are set outside ourselves, and that we can truly experience subjectivity as abstract and remote.

Bjarne Melgaard self-consciously eccentric poses makes him a candidate for the subject ala Heidegger: in the mini-biopic cited above, Melgaard poses with his back to the camera, pants around his ankles, and seemingly making love to his own paintings. Later, he gathers together a group of pigs in his studio – possibly as stand-ins for critics, or even audiences – only to tear up his own finished artwork and feeding it to the animals.

Melgaard's eradication of the artist by reducing the artwork to a subjectless gaze observing the beholder is complimented and ultimately fulfilled by a claim that every "painting is connected to the person who did it," in other words that the relation of subjectivity remains even as the artwork is handed over from the artist to audiences. Melgaard's destruction of his own artwork metaphorically stands in for his self-destruction, and it is this self-eradicating act that has solicited a clear and at times brutal response from his context. As Xan Brooks notes in an interview with an even more infamous – and according to his own admission – alcoholised film director, Lars von Trier, "it is perhaps the fate of all *enfants terribles* to eventually slip up and be trampled – either by their own demons or by the weight of public opinion" (Brooks, 2018).



Melgaard: *This is how Bjarne Melgaard and his architectural partners at Snøhetta imagined his residence "A house to die in" situated in the oak forest at Edvard Munch's former dwelling outside Oslo.*

⁵ The point here isn't whether or not Melgaard is – as it were – "faking" his symptoms, putting on a show to make his art more interesting and marketable, but how he makes a very public display of the resolution to Lacan's dilemma at the fork of his path through the mirror stage: how is it that Melgaard tries to make piece with the excruciating voices inhabiting his studio at the conclusion of his foray into hedonism and illegality?

In the case of Melgaard his unceasing transgressions of tradition and the law seems inevitably to lead to a retreat into the same tradition. As Lacan noted the paranoiac can find solace in so far as he is able to acknowledge the love embedded in the parental dictum and the phallic function.

It comes as no surprise that Melgaard in the end has sought to relocate his artistic practice to Norway, proposing along with the internationally acclaimed architects at *Snøhetta* (National September 11 Museum at the World Trade Center site in New York, NY, the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet in Oslo, etc.) to build a new dwelling and studio in Oslo, on the former property of the Norwegian national iconic painter Edvard Munch. While initially approved by the local authorities, Melgaard's construction was met with massive resistance from artists, art historians and locals, who pointed out that in addition to supplanting the memory of Munch, it also stood to violate a precious forest that was immortalised in some of Munch's last painting (such as *Kurtise i parken*, 1942), leading to a reversal of the approval and a final rejection of his application last year.

Interviewed on Scandinavian television about the project in 2014, Melgaard explained that the name of the project – “A house to die in” – was not chosen as a signifier of his imminent death. Referring to his much publicised drug abuse and excessive life-style, he was asked if he built this house as a tomb. Melgaard's response was that



Munch: Edvard Munch's iconic *Kurtise i parken* (1942) features some of the oak trees that surrounded his studio. If approved, part of this forest would have had to be removed to make way for Bjarne Melgaard's new residence.

It's not that much about dying, but about an architectural term, because it's about an architectural death. The project is influenced by “narcitecture” – a mix of all kinds of styles; tasteless, like a plastic sofa next to a 17th Century chandelier, and those kinds of things. (Skavlan 2014)

The unremitting reference to narcotics, his questionable relation to an icon of Norway's tradition of plastic arts, and his seeming disregard for the natural resource in the area set the stage for the final refusal of Melgaard's grand construction. There is a sense in which the artist in effect received the counter gift from the instance of the father that was most called for: instead of granting permission to Melgaard's continued levelling of legal and natural boundaries the law-giving instance, the municipal committee on technical matters, refused to accept his proposal, and thus acknowledged him as a participant in the field of administration.⁶ In Lacan's terms we could say that the artist here receives the acknowledgment from the law-issuing instance through a refusal, and that by submitting to the order of the law the artist is given a pathway out of paranoia and suffering.

What is telling is that Melgaard resembles more closely a rather *different* tragic figure from the Norwegian domain of high art. In one of Henrik Ibsen's most well-known plays, *Ghosts*, the young protagonist Oswald withers away in the final act, purportedly due to an STD he has inherited from his father.⁷ As the curtain is set to fall on him and the play Oswald declares to his mother, who is present at his side, that there is one last wish he will make on her: “Give me the sun, mother.”⁸ The sun, symbolically replacing his father, is what Oswald perceives to be the only possible redemptive object. However, not only does the impossibility of his demand place his mother in a position of abandonment, Oswald's final wish ultimately locates him as an unconceivable figure.

⁶ The future of the project is undecided at the moment. According to *Snøhetta* Melgaard and his partners are considering alternative location for the house (personal communication).

⁷ Henrik Ibsen seems to have believed that it was possible for syphilis to be transmitted from father to son, which isn't the case. However, this scientific detail doesn't detract from the tragic momentum of the play, written at the height of artistic naturalism, where the sins of the fathers return to haunt their sons.

⁸ Ibsen 1881, 163.

It is here that we find the analogy with Melgaard and his “House to die in”: in lieu of his artistic forefather Munch’s acknowledgement, the artist literally sets out to tear down the trees depicted in some of the old master’s later paintings. In the remnants of the forest Melgaard wished to make a clearing that would make room for his structure, his house of death, where, as the artist was obliterated, his art could flourish. However, this clearing, while possibly necessary for the creation of art, can only exist in so far as it is a temporary dwelling. As Martin Heidegger reminds us in “The origin of the work of art,”

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place comes to presence. There is a clearing. Thought from out of beings, it is more in being than is the being. This open center is, therefore, not surrounded by beings. Rather, this illuminating center itself encircles all beings – like the nothing that we scarcely know. (Heidegger 2002 [1971], 30)

This clearing – like an open space in the forest that is lit up in distinction from its surrounding darkness – is nevertheless only accessible in certain privileged moments. Drawing on the ancient Greek notion of *aletheia*, Heidegger pointed out that in every recollection lies a forgetting, and it is dual movement between opening and closing, remembering and forgetting, that lies at the core of insight in Heidegger’s approach to knowledge.

Finally, then, the impasse Bjarne Melgaard reached with his personal housing project curiously mirrors an impasse in the art world at large. As Slavoj Žižek notes in his recent *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight*:

We live in an extraordinary era when there is no tradition on which we can base our identity, no frame of meaningful universe that would enable us to lead a life beyond hedonist reproduction. This New World Disorder, this gradually emerging world-less civilization, exemplarily affects the young who oscillate between the intensity of fully burning out (sexual enjoyment, drugs, alcohol, up to violence) and the endeavor to succeed (study, make a career, earn money... within the existing capitalist order). Permanent transgression thus becomes the standard – recall the deadlock of sexuality or art today: is there anything more dull, opportunistic, and sterile than to succumb to the superego injunction of incessantly inventing new artistic transgressions and provocations (the performance artist masturbating on stage or masochistically cutting himself, the sculptor displaying decaying animal corpses or human excrement), or to the parallel injunction to engage in more and more “daring” forms of sexuality? (2018)

What could be a more apt description of Melgaard’s artistic programme than Žižek’s portrayal of the dull, repetitive, endlessly transgressive modern artist seeking opportunistic self-glorification? In the end, the decision to *refuse* Melgaard to inscribe his artistic project into the back garden of Munch can turn out to be the ultimate gift: Only thus, can we surmise, can the artist again find solace within the boundary of the collective and break out of the current artistic deadlock.

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